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Reconciliation: Does education have a role?

Alan Smith and Clare Magill

This article examines the findings from a recent study conducted by the UNESCO Centre, University of Ulster.¹ The study, undertaken between January 2007 and May 2009, focused on two post-conflict contexts - Northern Ireland and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) - and was funded by the European Union's Peace and Reconciliation Programme (Peace II Extension) under Measure 2.1, 'Outward and Forward Looking Region'. In total, 91 children and young people were interviewed in both Northern Ireland and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The cohort comprised children and young people aged 11, 16-18 and 24-25 years. The aim was to explore, in a comparative way, children and young people's experience of conflict in their region (the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland and the 1992-1995 war in BiH); their awareness and understanding of the conflict and where this awareness came from; their concepts of reconciliation; and views on the role of education in reconciliation. This article looks mainly at the findings from Northern Ireland. It considers how these findings fit into the current debate around 'dealing with the past', with particular reference to the Report of the Consultative Group on the Past, and concludes with a number of policy recommendations emerging from the research.

The primary focus for the study was on children and young people. Whilst previous work such as the Cost of the Troubles Study² has documented the stories of individual children, none have focused explicitly on the concept of reconciliation as perceived by children and young people, yet educators of different age groups in many post-conflict situations are being asked to promote the concept of education for reconciliation. For example, the concept is identified as part of the new statutory programme for Citizenship education in the Northern Ireland Curriculum, but training and guidance with a specific and explicit focus on the concept of reconciliation has not been developed and we know very little about the way in which different age groups perceive and understand this complex concept.

Bosnia and Herzegovina and Northern Ireland are at different stages in a longer-term peace process, which means that both are dealing to some extent with legacies of conflict that have some similarities. For example, there are similarities in how best to provide support for victims and support social and economic reconstruction. Both regions face challenges in terms of the legacies of conflict for existing institutional arrangements and new political structures. From a comparative dimension there is much to be learned from the experiences, perceptions and understandings held by children and both regions have acknowledged that education is a key area for development. However, there is also much to be learned from the distinctiveness of each context. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina the issue of war crimes is still being addressed and there is an emphasis on the experiences of displaced persons and returnees, whilst in Northern Ireland debate is currently emerging about whether there is a need for some form of truth recovery process. A further significant difference is that each region has its own distinctive timeline in terms of its peace process. For example, key dates for the Northern Ireland context include the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the key date is the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement. Each of these sets a different timeframe in defining the 'post-conflict generation'.

The study raised questions about the experiences and perspectives different generations might have on the conflict and its legacies in their region. This builds broadly on the work of Donald Shriver³, which suggests that the issues and attitudes of post-conflict generations may be very different from those who experienced the conflict. One aspect of peace processes that has been little thought through, is that within a relatively short number of years following a peace agreement, generations of children are born that have no direct experience of the violent conflict that took place within their society. This is already taking place within Northern Ireland and other contexts where there are anecdotal accounts from teachers and teacher educators that many children and student teachers they encounter find it extremely difficult to relate to discussion about the conflict. This is not to say that such 'post-conflict generations' are unaware of legacies of the conflict, but suggests that their lack of direct experience of the conflict itself may mean that their understanding of the conflict and motivation to engage with issues arising from it may be different from the generations that lived through the experience.

In more international contexts this challenge may be similar to that of engaging post-war generations of Europeans in understanding the experience and legacies of World War II, yet to a certain extent it could be claimed that the European Union represents an excellent example of post-war reconciliation between peoples and nations. The challenge for educators of different age

groups is therefore to gain deeper insight into the perspectives of different generations on the conflict and what this might mean in terms of securing engagement, developing resources and using appropriate working methods to promote reconciliation.

The project took account of this through consultations in each region involving children finishing primary school, young people finishing post-primary schooling, and adults in their early twenties. In Northern Ireland, for example, this represents three distinct ‘generations’: primary school children that were born after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998; post-primary school children born around the time of this Agreement; and young adults born and educated whilst the conflict was still taking place. Talking to young people with some direct experience of the conflict in their society as well as the children of the ‘post-conflict’ generation gave us greater insight into these different perspectives.

In Northern Ireland, the research findings support the recommendation made by the Consultative Group on the Past that education programmes be developed “which inform young people, in a balanced way, about the nature and impact of the conflict”.⁴ Young people in both regions indicated clearly that education has a positive and distinctive role to play in helping successive generations understand the recent history of violent conflict even though it may be sensitive, controversial and, some would argue, too recent. It is also clear that young people do not want the past to be ignored, nor do they want to dwell on negative aspects of the past. Instead, they want to understand what happened and why, and how to create a more positive future.

The children and young people interviewed demonstrated an awareness that issues relating to conflict and to post-conflict reconciliation need to be addressed sensitively and in an age-appropriate way that includes multiple perspectives and takes account of the hurt and pain of victims and survivors. Even among those who felt that it may be too early to do this, there was some acknowledgement that at least the task itself was legitimate and necessary and that the process should be started. This is particularly important given that, with each passing year, we are losing opportunities to make most benefit in terms of access to the direct resources and knowledge that we have about the conflict.

How, then, do we as a society respond to this educational challenge? What is clear is that there needs to be political consensus that this is a legitimate task for schools and other organisations (including the informal sector) to begin to tackle it, otherwise teachers and educators will be operating in a vulnerable

environment. At best it is about helping understanding and also about trying to give some kind of positive encouragement for the future. The alternative is to advocate silence and avoidance. There is a need to provide schools with more support in exploring and clarifying the concept of reconciliation. In Northern Ireland, the statutory requirement for Local and Global Citizenship at Key Stage 3 (for 11-14 year olds) requires that pupils have opportunities to investigate “ways of managing conflict and promoting community relations and reconciliation”. The youth work curriculum, ‘A Model for Effective Practice’ has similar provisions. However respondents’ lack of clarity concerning the concept of reconciliation suggests that teaching and learning resources directly addressing the concept might be of particular use.

Those interviewed, particularly the 16-18 year olds in Northern Ireland, were keen to understand the underlying causes of the conflict. The findings from this research reinforce some of the findings from the Report of the Consultative Group on the Past, which recognises the “importance of education in building a better understanding of the nature and causes of the conflict”.⁵ Of course it will not be possible, nor indeed is it desirable, to have a single agreed interpretation of the past. This suggests that the task can only be undertaken if there is a commitment to include multiple perspectives and encourage critical thinking. Children may be exposed to views and attitudes with which their parents disagree and, as such, even though it may be uncomfortable, recognition among parents will be needed that this is a legitimate approach.

Whether or not educators accept it as a legitimate task, it is clear that young people themselves consider that educators have an important role and responsibility to foster understanding and to contribute towards reconciliation. There is an argument for widespread awareness raising and training within the teaching profession and with youth and community workers as well as engagement with professional organisations and unions. Educators need to be consulted about their willingness to undertake the task and what support they might require.

Consideration should be given to some form of joint training for teachers and youth workers on these issues to facilitate positive, constructive dialogue between the formal and informal sectors in order for them to maximise their potential to complement each other. There are enormous benefits to be gained in this area from joint training and active collaboration across the formal and informal education sectors. This kind of cross-fertilisation can help produce richer approaches rooted in the experiences and concerns of young people and their communities.

The Report of the Consultative Group on the Past points to concerns “that resources are not being made available to support the next generation to cope with the legacy of the conflict” in Northern Ireland.⁶ The Report also advises that resources are needed to assist young people “to guard against any distorted perspective on normality”.⁷ Developing an acceptable multi-perspective approach to contested events is clearly an educational task which requires the support of key agencies such as curriculum authorities and publishers. Considerable educational and pedagogical expertise is also needed to develop age-appropriate texts, websites and other digital and media-based resources.

As well as being interactive and user-friendly, such resources should challenge children and young people’s values and attitudes and facilitate the development of critical thinking skills, in line with the Consultative Group on the Past’s recommendation that young people be “provided with the skills necessary to ensure there is no repeat of the past”.⁸ Also in line with the findings of the Consultative Group on the Past, consideration should be given to the development of an archive of stories, for educational purposes, relating to people’s experiences of the conflict.

It is worth noting that new social networking and Web 2.0 technologies offer young people opportunities to create their own resources and to invite others to interact with and co-create such resources. It is vital that formal and informal educators are comfortable with these technologies and the pedagogical benefits they offer.

Whilst many of the children and young people we interviewed referred to hearing about conflict from within their own family, there are also clearly many instances where issues are not spoken about within families. This particularly seems to be the case in BiH, where the ferocity of the war had such a profound impact. Opinion is divided on the reliability and impartiality of the perspectives that are passed between generations and families, tied up with references to passing on bitterness, prejudice and intolerance. We need to understand more how intergenerational dialogue works, in terms of knowledge and attitudes. Consideration should be given to providing funding for a pilot study on this theme, which could involve older people (for example, grandparents) acting as resources in schools or youth groups. In Northern Ireland, this could feed into the recommendation made by the Consultative Group on the Past encouraging young people’s participation in storytelling initiatives. Ideally, such initiatives should include an investigative dimension and facilitate the development of critical thinking skills in young people.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that we consult children and young people about matters that affect them and take their views into account when developing policy. This research highlights the value of consulting with children and young people, and demonstrates how, even amongst young people themselves, it will be difficult to find consensus on what educational approach should be adopted. There is a challenge here for educators to go beyond consultation to the point where young people are co-creators of new resources and narratives.

The education system in Northern Ireland is in the midst of significant structural and curricular change. Prior to a common curriculum Northern Ireland had also adopted an educational policy position in relation to the conflict⁹ which stated that all teachers had a responsibility to contribute towards the improvement of community relations. This policy was translated into practice through Education for Mutual Understanding as a cross-curricular theme in the 1980s and 1990s as well as through cross-community contact programmes. With the advent of the statutory curriculum in 1989, common programmes were also adopted for the teaching of History and Religious Education (R.E.) and, most recently, Education for Local and Global Citizenship, which is conceptually grounded in universal human rights and responsibilities.

In the years following the 1998 Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, control of education has been devolved to a new Northern Ireland Assembly with a locally elected Minister of Education and a Northern Ireland Assembly Education Committee. A Review of Public Administration (RPA) means that a new, single Education and Skills Authority (ESA) will finally be established from January 2010. This will bring together many of the former responsibilities of local Education and Library Boards and curriculum authorities. Educators are also awaiting the outcome of a review of teacher education. Alongside these structural changes, there has been a long-running debate leading to the ending of academic selection at age eleven and considerable uncertainty about arrangements for the future transfer of children from primary to post-primary school. This has meant that other education issues have received less attention in recent times.

Nevertheless, significant progress has been made towards the introduction of a new Northern Ireland curriculum which places considerable emphasis on learning outcomes and skills. The new curriculum framework includes a number of potential opportunities for the inclusion of teaching and learning related to the Troubles as part of the recent history of Northern Ireland. For

example, one of the main aims of the revised curriculum is to “develop the young person as a contributor to society”. This is partly facilitated through the inclusion of Local and Global Citizenship as an area of ‘Learning for Life and Work’. At primary level, this opens up opportunities to build a stronger commitment to human rights values and practices from an early age. At post-primary level, the Local and Global Citizenship curriculum explicitly mentions that pupils should have opportunities to:

“Investigate how and why conflict, including prejudice, stereotyping, sectarianism and racism may arise in the community. Investigate ways of managing conflict and promoting community relations and reconciliation.”

The Citizenship framework also includes opportunities to examine key human rights commitments and investigate ways of strengthening democratic participation as an alternative to violence.

A range of other subject areas also have distinctive contributions to make. For example, the statutory requirements for History at Key Stage 3 requires that pupils aged 11-14 have opportunities to:

“Investigate the long and short term causes and consequences of the partition of Ireland and how it has influenced Northern Ireland today, including key events and turning points.”

Opportunities also exist through the inclusion of texts related to the Troubles as part of the English curriculum. The statutory requirements for English and Media Education at Key Stage 3 indicate that pupils should have opportunities to:

“Use literature, drama, poetry or the moving image to explore others’ needs and rights, for example, participate in a role play involving conflicting rights.”

The statutory requirements for Religious Education in Northern Ireland are drawn up by the four main Christian Churches. However, non-statutory guidance has been developed for RE teachers at Key Stage 3 so that they can see how the Churches’ requirements blend with the broader aims, objectives and key elements of the curriculum. These guidelines include recommendations that pupils aged 11-14 have opportunities to:

“Investigate how choices can be influenced by prejudice and sectarianism and ways in which reconciliation can be achieved through dialogue, outreach and action, for example, the churches’ role in peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland or South Africa; religious response to social justice issues in today’s world.”

Meanwhile in the Youth Work sector (both statutory and voluntary), the ‘Model for Effective Practice’ is underpinned by the principles of equity, diversity and interdependence and supports meaningful cross-community engagement between young people and a commitment to active citizenship.

Another important educational development in Northern Ireland is a current review of the Department of Education (DE) Community Relations Strategy. This may provide an opportunity to consider new forms of support for schools, teachers and pupils in engaging directly with the legacy of the Troubles and issues related to reconciliation. A particularly valuable contribution to support for this was made by the announcement of funding through the European Union’s Peace and Reconciliation Programme (PEACE III, Measure 1.2, Strand 1) which invited applications for projects that “explore the legacy and memory of the conflict through truth recovery, documentation, story telling and the recording of complex history and experience”. The call indicated that these may include: television and broadcasting materials; interactive web-based resources; archiving; exhibitions; and educational materials, including training and support for teachers, youth workers and community workers.

The Report of the Consultative Group on the Past has highlighted the need for much more widespread debate on dealing with the past in Northern Ireland. It is clear that both formal and informal education have a key role to play. The education authorities need to provide leadership in initiating this debate within the education community.

In light of these overall developments, the following are a number of concrete recommendations.

1. The role of education in dealing with the past and contributing to societal reconciliation should be discussed by the Northern Ireland Assembly Education Committee and a position paper issued for consultation, including consultation with children and young people.

2. This research has highlighted the desire of the children and young people interviewed to learn more about the Troubles and how they might contribute to a more peaceful future. More widespread consultation with children and young people on how this can be achieved in practice needs to take place. This could take the form of more widespread, local consultations through schools and youth groups, perhaps initiated by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) and/or local youth and children's organisations. These consultations need to engage and involve young people, not only in articulating their views but also in co-creating new ways of dealing with the past and building young people's commitment to human rights principles and practices and democratic values. The views of children and young people on this issue also need to be incorporated into the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister's (OFMDFM) Children and Young People's Strategy.
3. The Department of Education for Northern Ireland should seek the views of school authorities on the role that schools should play in enhancing young people's understanding the Troubles and how they might contribute to a more peaceful future. On the basis of this feedback to this consultation, the Department of Education could issue a Circular with guidance on the expectations from schools.
4. The Department of Education Community Relations branch might ask every school to consider the role that they can play in helping young people understand the legacy of the recent past and how they might contribute to a more peaceful future. A summary of their recommendations could be collated and circulated to all schools as a starting point for further discussion and guidance.
5. The inclusion of this work within the curriculum has significant implications particularly for teachers and teacher educators. Their views need to be sought in a systematic way, for instance through the recently established General Teaching Council (GTCNI) and/or the teaching trade unions.
6. History teachers need to be consulted about whether or not any further revisions need to take place to the Northern Ireland History curriculum, for example, whether there needs to be a specific statutory requirement to focus on the history of the Troubles, even though this is implied in the current requirements.

7. The views of primary teachers should also be sought as to whether history of this kind should be introduced at Key Stage 2.
8. Those responsible for the provision of in-service education for teachers within the new education structures now need to take account of the 'post conflict' environment. Some teachers have benefited from professional development in relation to the teaching of Local and Global Citizenship. This needs to be refreshed and provision made for helping a wider group of teachers, such as English, History and R.E. teachers to address issues of reconciliation in the classroom.
9. The new Education and Skills Authority (ESA) will be responsible for providing curriculum support. Television and media have been particularly active in developing user-friendly resources related to Education for Mutual Understanding, History and citizenship education. The Department of Education and the new ESA should continue to be represented on the advisory councils of educational television providers to explore whether new and targeted resources might be required. Similarly, DE and ESA could convene a meeting of educational publishers to consider whether age-appropriate texts related to the Troubles need to be developed for use by schools (for example, in the way that the Peruvian authorities have done following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission there).
10. The potentially divisive issue of remembrance and commemoration is of particular concern, especially within schools with children from diverse social and political backgrounds. Some thought needs to be given to this, as well as to whether field sites, murals, memorials and museums could be used as educational resources. The potential education role of the proposed Conflict and Reconciliation Centre on the former site of the Maze prison needs to be considered, if indeed this proposition is still being considered by our politicians. Thought should be given to its role as a possible field site or interpretive centre for schools.
11. There are likely to be distinctive concerns amongst those groups representing victims and survivors. These will need to be taken into consideration in bringing any recommendations forward.
12. The views of parents and their expectations of schools in dealing with the Troubles should be sought, for example through a specially commissioned survey or the inclusion of a module in the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey.

Notes

1. To receive a copy of the research report from this study, “Education and Reconciliation: The Perspectives of Children and Young People in Northern Ireland and Bosnia and Herzegovina”, please contact Clare Magill – c.magill@ulster.ac.uk / 028 703 23287.
2. The Cost of the Troubles Study, Final Report 1999. See also Marie Smyth and the Cost of the Troubles Study (1998), *Half the Battle: Understanding the impact of the Troubles on children and young people*, Londonderry, INCORE.
3. Donald Shriver (2005), *Honest Patriots: Loving a country enough to remember its misdeeds*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
4. Page 27, Report of the Consultative Group on the Past - <http://www.cgpnri.org/>.
5. Page 27, Ibid.
6. Page 27, Ibid.
7. Page 72, Ibid.
8. Page 38, Ibid.
9. NI Department of Education Circular 1982/21